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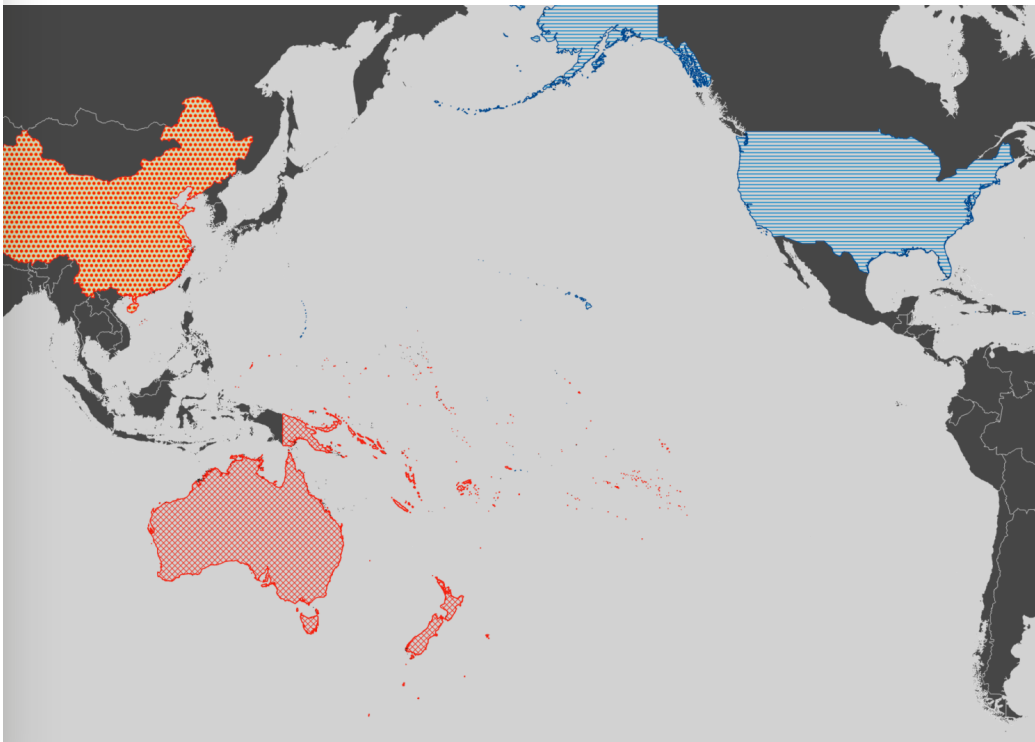
Exclusive—How China's Military is Quietly Gaining Control of the Pacific

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By [John Feng](#) and [Didi Kirsten Tatlow](#)

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a has quietly extended its military reach far across the Pacific by building
ns of ports, airports, and communications projects at key points in a vast
n that could shut out the United States and its allies in the event of war, [a report](#) says.

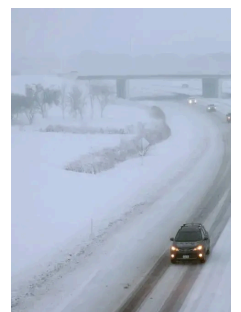
projects appeared civilian in nature but were in reality "strategic nodes"
ching about 3,000 miles, from Papua New Guinea immediately north of
lly Australia, to Samoa, which lies about 40 miles away from the U.S.
ory of American Samoa in Polynesia, according to the new study made
able exclusively to *Newsweek*. The remote, scattered islands of the Pacific
once crucial to American warfighting strategy in World War II, and they
l [play a role](#) in the next global conflict, too.

growing logistics network in the South Pacific—built mostly by Chinese
owned companies with ties to its defense sector—was being overlooked
as Beijing's rivalry with the U.S. deepened and as [China's overseas base](#)
[tions](#) elsewhere drew attention, said Domingo I-Kwei Yang, an assistant
rch fellow at Taiwan's Institute for National Defense and Security
rch (INDSR), an institution funded by the government of self-ruled
an, which China has threatened to invade.

question is not whether, but when, China will complete a civil-military
ics system in the Pacific," Yang said in *China's Dual-Use Infrastructure in*
acific, a study published on Monday as part of the Coastwatchers 2.0
ct, a collaboration between the University of Canterbury in [New Zealand](#)
Project Sinopsis, a research center in Prague in the Czech Republic.

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China-built **civil-military sites** in the South Pacific

Seaports Airports Information and Communication Technology



Source: Domingo I-Kwei Yang, AidData, geoBoundaries

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Newsweek

The strategic network began to grow about two decades ago and today is embedded in China's 2013 "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), a global infrastructure plan that is purposefully "dual use"—both civilian and military in nature, said Yang in an interview.

China's BRI is not merely about infrastructure but a vehicle for strategic influence" with the dual-use infrastructure it constructs "a force multiplier," he wrote. The network could eventually make it difficult for the U.S. and its allies to operate across large swathes of the Pacific and make it easier for China to invade Taiwan, which the Communist Party considers to be part of Chinese territory.

China aims to reshape regional power dynamics and challenge U.S.-led alliances," compelling traditional U.S. allies in the region—Japan, South Korea,

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Image captured by Airbus satellites on August 2023 and provided by Google Earth shows Canton Island Airport in the South Pacific. [Read More | Google Earth/Airbus/Google](#)

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nodes were also part of an even more ambitious geostrategic plan known as the Southern Link, with designs all the way to South America, thus further connecting the United States to the north, the report said. Last year, China opened a seaport built and operated by state-owned shipping giant COSCO at Iquitos, Peru, a logistics node on the other side of the Pacific Ocean.

Asked about its goals in the Pacific, a representative of the Chinese embassy in Washington, D.C., told *Newsweek*: "To build a better future with its neighbors, China will hold high the banner of a community with a shared future for mankind and take the building of a peaceful, tranquil, prosperous, beautiful and friendly as its common vision."

"We will uphold the Asian values of peace, cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, use high-quality Belt and Road cooperation as the main form, and pursue the Asian security model that features sharing weal and seeking common ground while shelving differences, and prioritizing dialogue and consultation," spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in an email.

te Department spokesperson said, "Beijing uses its Belt and Road Initiative to advance its political agenda abroad."

U.S. government aims to offer credible alternatives that leverage public and private financing in priority areas that make America safer, stronger, and more prosperous," the spokesperson said. These included "traceable supply chains, trusted information and communications technology networks, effective transportation infrastructure such as rails and ports, and leveling the playing field in commercial deals that will help U.S. firms compete in key international markets."

and how BRI projects impacted security for Taiwan, the spokesperson said, "The United States supports peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait. China's aggressive military activities and rhetoric toward Taiwan exacerbate tensions and put the region's security and the world's prosperity at risk. In the face of China's intimidation tactics and destabilizing behavior, the United States' enduring commitment to our allies and partners, including Taiwan, remains."

A series of firsts starting in mid-2024 that startled Pacific nations, China fired a ballistic missile from its southern island province of Hainan that splashed down in the Pacific Ocean in the economic waters of Kiribati, a nation of low-lying atolls; carried out live-fire exercises in the Tasman Sea between New Zealand and Australia that forced the diversion of airborne commercial flights; and sent PLA Navy ships to circumnavigate Australia.

a's Defense Ministry said that the naval exercises took place far from
alia, that China's live-fire training were conducted with repeated safety
es and that all China's actions were entirely in accordance with
national law.

; of Pacific Pearls

s research identified 39 active strategic nodes, with an additional review
Newsweek finding 11 more, bringing the total to at least 50. The investment
about \$3.55 billion, according to *Newsweek* research—a mixture of direct
ndirect grants and loans from the Chinese state and its banks, regional
opment banks and the states themselves.

nodes are in 11 Pacific Island countries, about two-thirds of the 18
bers of the regional Pacific Islands Forum. Among the projects identified
Newsweek were 26 for construction at airports. At least 12 of the airports
l now accommodate China's biggest military transporter, the Y-20, Yang

e of the companies carrying out the projects are under U.S. sanctions, such
ina Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and Huawei
nologies.

prominent were China Railway Engineering Corporation, China Overseas Engineering Group and China Civil Engineering Construction Corp—all grew out of China's Ministry of Railways—as well as China Harbor Engineering Company, a CCCC subsidiary, and Sinohydro Corporation, a subsidiary of Power Construction Corporation of China.

Pushback

One venue was Papua New Guinea, population 12 million, with 21 projects under way, including a new airport at Momote, which serves Manus Island and is near a deep-water port used by U.S. ships. That gave China a potential "foothold" to monitor and disrupt U.S. operations, intercepting joint missions between the U.S. and regional partners, Yang said.

The prime minister's office in Port Moresby did not respond to *Newsweek's* request for comment.

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There had been little pushback from regional powers such as Australia and New Zealand, said Cleo Paskal, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C., who testified to Congress this year on U.S. national interests in the Pacific. That could have consequences if there were a crisis over Taiwan," she said.

"There is going to be very little or no space for free countries to operate," Yang told *Newsweek*, adding that Chinese naval capabilities—now the largest

Undercover Infrastructure

Luganville, site of a major U.S. naval base in the Pacific War, was also a vital port for China's "undercover infrastructures," with the state-owned Shanghai Port Construction Group extending a wharf in Luganville port by nearly 1,200 feet, turning it to accommodate large cargo vessels—as well as Chinese warships, Yang wrote.

On Luganville's strategic past as one of the largest U.S. naval bases in the Pacific during World War II, China appears to be laying the groundwork for a new military foothold—only the host country had to pay for it," Yang wrote. The port project was funded by a \$97 million loan from China's state-owned Bank, public records showed.

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Underlining China's interest, in October 2024 two People's Liberation Army warships arrived in Vanuatu's capital, Port Vila, in the first known deployment to the South Pacific of the Type 055 and Type 052D large guided-missile destroyers.

In 2008, Vanuatu had been the recipient of a project by Huawei to connect Port Vila and Vanuatu government agencies via a fiberoptic network. The project and its phases spanned 13 years.

oa, right by American Samoa, has also received Chinese airport, seaport information technology projects. China had very little trade with Samoa, said, raising questions about Beijing's interest.

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governments of Samoa and Vanuatu did not respond to requests for comment.

Australian government did not comment on the record about the intent of BRI.

via email, an Australian government spokesperson said, "Australia's position on the Belt and Road Initiative is that we engage on a case-by-case basis with infrastructure projects that are transparent and open, uphold robust standards, meet genuine need, and avoid unsustainable debt burdens for recipient countries."

ia is an important trading partner for many Pacific Island countries, as it is for Australia. We respect the right of Pacific nations to make sovereign decisions about their engagement with other countries," the spokesperson said.

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s study did not include other infrastructure such as roads and bridges, e highlighted the importance of fisheries, equipped with new piers, that ese companies such as Fujian Zhonghong Fishery were also developing in acific, for example in Daru in Papua New Guinea, opposite [Australia](#). Daru top the Torres Strait, a key maritime choke point controlling commercial energy shipping routes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

ries opened the door to China's extensive networks of fishing and time militias, according to Yang. "China is likely to extend its use of time militias, armed and subsidized civilian groups, from the East and a China Seas to the Torres Strait. The Daru Island fishery park could, fore, act as a cover for China's gray-zone aggression in the region."



ce: [Domingo I-Kwei Yang](#), [AidData](#)

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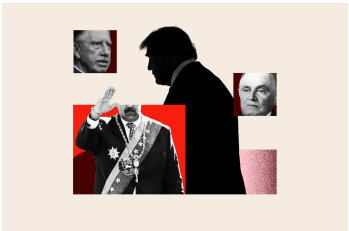


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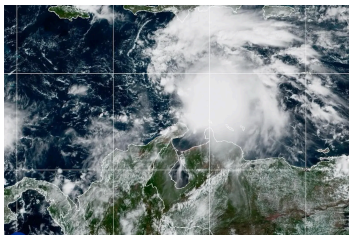
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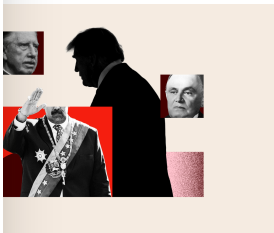
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